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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 005196

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [IZ](#) [XF](#) [IS](#) [JO](#) [MEPP](#)

SUBJECT: GOJ PUSHES BACK AT POPULAR DISSATISFACTION  
ON IRAQ AND DOMESTIC ISSUES

REF: A. AMMAN 4719 B. AMMAN 5131 C. STATE 169304

Classified By: CDA Gregory L. Berry for reasons 1.5  
(B) and (D)

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SUMMARY  
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1. (S) In recent weeks, the GOJ--through the King's public address on August 15 (see Ref A), the Prime Minister's speech to the Jordan press association on September 2, and Royal Court Chief Fayez Tarawneh's September 2 address to the Amman World Affairs Council (see Ref B)--has responded more aggressively to public criticism of the GOJ's stance on Iraq, the MEPP, and other domestic issues, including its decision to postpone elections. In doing so, the King, PM, and other GOJ officials have put forth the idea of "Jordan First", underscoring that Jordanian interests are its primary concern and that GOJ policy on the issues, particularly Iraq, will reflect this. By taking these issues to the public, the GOJ is also beginning to address popular frustration with an uneven record of government communication on core issues. End Summary.

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IRAQ: PREPARING THE PUBLIC  
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2. (S) In contrast to the GOJ's sometimes misleading public statements on Iraq in July, the King in his August 15 speech and PM in his September 2 interview placed the responsibility for resolving the current crisis on the Iraqi government. PM Abul Ragheb emphasized that the GOJ will maintain a "balanced relationship between Iraq and the U.S." and underscored that both were "strategic partners of Jordan." By placing the burden of responsibility on Saddam Hussein and emphasizing the strategic nature of its relationship with the U.S., the GOJ appears to be signaling to Jordanians that it will not jeopardize its relationship with the U.S. in the event of a conflict with Iraq. However, recent discussions with embassy contacts indicate the government's message so far has had only a limited impact on the public.

3. (S) Street opinion in Jordan, while harboring no fondness for Saddam Hussein, remains critical of perceived U.S. efforts to impose its will on the region. Public frustration over Iraq is one facet of the popular consensus that the Arab world has no influence on U.S. actions in the region. Recent high-level U.S. public diplomacy efforts on Iraq have not shaken the view of many here that the U.S. will use the U.N. as nothing more than a facade, and that consultations will be limited. As for the U.S. case against Iraq, Jordanians persist in dismissing or downplaying the possibility that Iraq may be harboring CBW or WMD, despite Iraq's sordid and well-documented history of WMD use.

4. (S) Politically sophisticated contacts worry about the economic and political ramifications for Jordan of any prolonged offensive against Iraq. Most caution that public opinion will run heavily against the U.S., but those connected to the government believe the security services will be able to handle popular discontent on the streets, albeit with stretched resources. To curb the "street", these contacts urge the U.S. to make sure that any move against Saddam is quick: "do not let the situation linger." The reaction of the Iraqi people to any action will likely affect public opinion here. If the Iraqi people were to welcome U.S. troops as liberators, "it will diffuse tensions."

5. (S) The potential for U.S. military action against Iraq is inevitably linked to the Palestinian issue in the minds of Jordanians. Criticism of U.S. policy on Iraq is often tied to the U.S.'s "one-sided" approach to the MEPP and the perceived reluctance to enforce a "just" solution on the Palestinian issue. There is

widespread speculation that Israel will use any action against Iraq to transfer Palestinians from the West Bank to Jordan while the International Community is focused elsewhere.

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DOMESTICALLY, NO APOLOGIES FOR POSTPONING ELECTIONS  
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16. (C) While the GOJ's evolving public policy on Iraq has yet to have much impact, the King's postponement of elections--as announced in his August 15 speech--continues to generate broad criticism. The PM addressed these critics in his September 2 remarks by warning that if elections were held now, they could "fall under external influence." He defended the quick tempo of temporary laws that have been passed since the Parliament was dissolved last June, citing their necessity for the "country's development." He also offered unusually strong criticism of the political role that professional associations have assumed and encouraged the associations to stick to addressing the concerns of their professions, not politics. The PM also confronted criticism that the government is outlawing demonstrations, "We did not ban rallies and marches, but rather regulated them."

17. (C) The message on elections is a hard sell to both sophisticated political observers and the street. Most contacts balk at the government's defense that regional instability is a reason to delay. "The situation is more unstable now than when the government first delayed elections...and it is only growing worse!" One Parliamentarian detailed, district by district, how the Islamists could only gain 20-25 seats under the current electoral system--hardly a threat to the government. (The government response in private is that a number of "swing" parliamentarians would ally themselves with the avowed Islamists on key issues including Iraq, creating management problems with the GOJ. Many contacts argue that people need some forum for venting their growing frustrations--protesting in Parliament is better than protesting in the street. Even some supporters of the government argue that a sitting Parliament with a strong opposition voice would strengthen the King's hand, both domestically and internationally.

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SOMEONE NEEDS TO TALK TO THE PEOPLE  
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18. (C) The government's reluctance to defend it's policies directly with the people--the King's mid-August public address is only the second time he has spoken to the nation on camera since the beginning of the Intifada--has been a long-standing theme with our contacts. One Circassian contact opined in July that Jordan needs either a strong government with a Prime Minister who can communicate with the people, or a strong King with a natural feel for Jordanian constituencies, but right now "we have neither-" While it remains to be seen if the government's recent attempts at public diplomacy will affect public opinion, the government has at least recognized the need to defend its often unpopular policy decisions.

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COMMENT  
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19. (C) The GOJ's recent efforts to directly address the people is a welcome step. While many Jordanians may not accept the government's reasoning, there is a pressing need to prepare the populace for potential disruptions in coming months. The issue of Iraq will be particularly divisive here, as the public imagination will be focused on the plight of the Iraqi people, not their leader. We can expect zigs and zags in the GOJ's language on Iraq as circumstances dictate, but the government seems to have settled on a broad outline for its public audience.  
BERRY